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## Scientists in public

It is traditional for scientists to return to Europe from visits to the United States with their batteries recharged and a whole host of new ideas picked up in haste to be tried out at leisure. And it is equally traditional for those first few days after re-entry to be days of frustration, with limited funds, petty bureaucracy and inferior telephones. Gradually, however, there occurs a readjustment to the Old World and its range of values, almost like a shift of cultural Circadian rhythms. And the British can console themselves with the often-heard assertion that we may not have the greatest industrial vigour in the world, or a very significant growth in Gross National Product, but when it comes to the arts and sciences there are immense riches, and these are continually being fed by bright youngsters who, by some pleasing quirk of genetics or environment, seem to keep on coming in their droves.

Now much of this may well be true, although certainly as far as the sciences are concerned lack of industrial vigour is leading to a lack of new opportunities for young people to use their talents, which in a very short time could lead to young British scientific talent being famed mostly through its widespread presence in the laboratories of other countries. But one area in which the trans-Atlantic traveller certainly ought to notice that the United Kingdom is already painfully lacking in comparison with the United States is in the matter of the scientist and public life. It is not just that science has a more visible rôle to play in the United States, although this is undoubtedly true of a country with a vigorous space programme, a highly technologised military, serious energy problems, a commitment to the latest in telecommunications, microprocessors and so on. This inevitably means a wide, mature exposure for science in the media, with all the concomitant benefits. But it is also that the individual scientist is welcomed much more openly and equally into the discussion of public affairs and is expected not just to make specialist inputs appropriate to his or her discipline, but also to be the broad and balanced person that in Britain the arts graduate is expected to be.

This phenomenon not only occurs through the

existence of the in-and-outer in the higher ranks of public service in Washington—a category, incidentally, which will probably diminish as President Carter's campaign for purity on conflict-of-interest bites more deeply. It is to be seen also in the proliferation of quasi-governmental and private institutions around the nation devoted to public policy, which think it entirely natural to hire—and fire—scientists in numbers. It is certain that amongst them are going to be many who will just conform to the seedy wheeler-dealer image. But the system has thrown up and will continue to throw up many scientists who acquire a grasp of generalities and an overall profundity rarely to be seen in British circles.

Now many scientists on both sides of the Atlantic undeniably want, and should be granted the right to stay perfectly happily out of the public eye, getting on with their research. But as science and society cross each others paths more and more, society ought to be asking a growing number of scientists to abandon their specialisations, even temporarily, and to worry about broader issues.

We have, of course, in Britain an excellent and highly professional civil service, and it performs many functions admirably in the matters of science and public policy. But we pay a price for its very professionalism and that is a resistance to outside pressures. And with negligible movement into or out of the service either by administrators or 'professionals' above the age of about 30 there must be the most serious questions about whether the service doesn't waste genuine human resources. Here is a question which the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, if it were to be looking for some new and difficult ground to break, could well investigate. The role of the scientist in British society and the problem of too much compartmentalisation, which discriminates against the free flow of ideas, is a subject of broad interest. The results of an investigation would hardly be spectacular, nor given to immediate and drastic action. But long-term benefits could be substantial if the scientist who so wishes could be encouraged to lead a fuller life and to provide more in the way of public service. □